

Writing for posterity: Thucydides on Pericles

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For over two millennia Thucydides' work has been read as a case-study in how to write history. Almost six hundred years after Thucydides wrote, we find him extolled by the satirist Lucian, in his treatise *How to Write History*, as a historian sober and pedantic, but nonetheless exemplary. Lucian's work, (composed in the 160's A.D.) concludes with a tale, which I shall use to illustrate Thucydides' historical methodology in book 2 of his *History*. Lucian, as an illustration of his credo that the historian should aim at eternity and prefer to write for posterity, tells the story of Sostratus of Cnidos, an architect who was commissioned to design the lighthouse on Pharos (62):

After he had built the work he wrote his name on the masonry inside, covered it with plaster, and having hidden it inscribed the name of the reigning king. He knew, as actually happened, that in a very short time the letters would fall away with the plaster and there would be revealed: 'Sostratos of Cnidos, the son of Dexiphanes, to the Divine Saviours, for the sake of them that sail at sea'. Thus not even he had regard for the immediate moment of his own brief life-time: he looked to our day and eternity, as long as the tower shall stand and his skill abide. (trans. K. Kilburn)

Unlike Sostratos, Thucydides did not produce his work for a royal commission, but like Sostratos, he recognized the transitory nature of the present and saw the opportunity to create an eternal monument, one inscribed with his own name.

Thucydides' project

Thucydides' life is conventionally dated to c.455- 400 B.C. He was an Athenian citizen, who identifies himself in the first sentence of his work as the author of the Peloponnesian war (1.1.1). This has led several scholars to question the transparency of a war which Thucydides claims as of his own authorship – as though the war is his own literary creation. While we refer to the work as the 'History of the Peloponnesian War' there is no word in Thucydides' opening sentence that corresponds to our term 'history', nor does Thucydides refer to himself as an historian. Later in the work (book 4), the reader discovers that Thucydides also served as an Athenian general in a military campaign to preserve the city of Amphipolis from the clutches of the Spartans, led by Brasidas. Thucydides refers to his own fate from the standpoint of the detached narrator, describing how he was exiled from Athens in 424 B.C., for his failure in this campaign. Thucydides the historian turns his failure as general into an advantage for his research: once exiled, he was better placed to travel and to view the war from the perspective of the other side (5.26).

The second book of the *History* offers us an insight into how Thucydides conceived of his historical project and is often taken to stand as the showpiece of the work. In the form in which it survives, Thucydides' *History* of the war between the Athenians and the Peloponnesians is incomplete. His narrative of the war stops in the eighth book with an account of the events of the year 411 B.C.; yet the Peloponnesian war did not end for another seven

years (404 B.C.). Although the *History* as a whole does not draw to a neat conclusion, book 2 forecasts the end of the war and has been written or revised in light of Thucydides' knowledge of how things turn out.

Although Thucydides makes his role as narrator constantly felt, he seldom steps into the foreground and features in his own narrative. Instead, the second book of the *History* is overshadowed by the glowing example of a single figure: the Athenian general Pericles. At the beginning of book 2 we find Pericles encouraging the Athenians and briefing them about their war coffers (2.13), in chapters 21 and 22 he stands firm in the face of widespread opposition to his tactics and then, in chapters 34–46, Pericles takes centre stage to deliver the funeral speech over the Athenians who have died in the first year of the war. The funeral speech (*epitaphios logos*, in Greek) was a genre with established conventions, among which was the claim that those who have died in defending their native land will gain immortal glory and will live on in the minds of successive generations of citizens. While this is a recurring theme in funeral orations, Thucydides gives it his own twist. The agenda of the politician delivering the funeral oration merges with that of the historian, trying to inscribe his war in history for all time.

When Pericles asserts that the deeds of the Athenians do not need a Homer to proclaim them, we see Thucydides transforming a familiar boast (that contemporary history surpasses the mythical Trojan War, the subject of Homer's *Iliad*), into a historiographical principle: that there are strict criteria for giving an account of contemporary events (2.41):

Mighty indeed are the marks and monuments of our empire which we have left. Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now. We do not need the praises of a Homer, or of anyone else whose words may delight us for the moment, but whose estimation of facts will fall short of what is really true.

Pericles then proceeds to claim that those who win fame live on in the hearts of future generations, both in their native lands and foreign lands (2.43):

For famous men have the whole earth as their memorial: it is not only the inscriptions on their graves in their own country that make them out; no, in foreign lands also, not in any visible form but in people's hearts, their memory abides and grows.

The theme of memory recurs in chapter 64, whose circumstances are a far cry from the grandeur of the funeral oration. In the intervening chapters the reader has learned of the plague which struck Athens in 430 B.C. and Pericles is now struggling to salvage his political reputation and attempting to justify his conduct and policies to his fellow Athenians. Pericles begins his defence by acknowledging their hostility towards him (2.60). One of the tactics of his speech is to associate his own unpopularity with the alleged unpopularity of Athens' empire. In fact he portrays the Athenian empire as a tyranny that is hated by its subjects. Yet, he insists, the Athenians are right to hold onto their empire, albeit tyrannical (2.63). Pericles implicitly concedes that he is acting like a tyrant, as opposed to a democratic politician, but asserts that he is in the right, nevertheless (2.64):

All who have taken it upon themselves to rule over others have incurred hatred and unpopularity for a time; but if one has a great aim to pursue, this burden of envy must be accepted, and it is wise to accept it. Hatred does not last for long; but the brilliance of the present is the glory of the future stored up for ever in the memory of men.

Continuing the theme of the funeral oration, in the above passage present loss is offset by the prospect of preservation in memory for the future. Pericles' argument about the short-lived span of hatred works on two levels. It serves to encourage the Athenians to ignore others' envy of their empire, but it also serves as a tacit affirmation of Pericles' own stance: that hatred is to be endured or that it is even necessary in order to gain an everlasting memorial as the solitary politician whose insight was ignored by his people. Mirroring the funeral oration that Pericles delivered over the Athenian war dead, in chapter 65 Thucydides gives Pericles his own private, 'funeral' eulogy which consolidates the theme of memory and the judgement of the future. Thucydides repeatedly stresses Pericles' gift of foresight and reports Pericles' predictions of Athenian victory, providing his advice is followed. At this point Thucydides gives us a preview of the Athenians' eventual defeat in 404 B.C. and draws a subtle connection between Pericles' death and Athens' defeat.

Predicting the past

While Thucydides does not hide his admiration for Pericles, there is no simple correspondence between the two men. Thucydides himself was also a general who felt the anger of his fellow Athenians, but he chooses not to emphasize his own personal history. And although Pericles expresses views about the transitory nature of the present compared with the long-term future and the way in which future ages will look back on the present, he is a character who is locked into a narrative about the past. In contrast, Thucydides transcends his historical situation. Thus, in his description of the plague, he is simultaneously a victim of the plague and a detached narrator, writing with one eye on the future (2.48):

I myself shall merely describe what it was like, and set down the symptoms, knowledge of which will enable it to be recognized, if it should ever break out again. I had the disease myself and saw others suffering from it.

I have chosen to draw attention to the themes of memory and the future in book 2, because I believe that they offer us an important insight into Thucydides' conception of his work. At the beginning of the History, Thucydides states that:

Thucydides the Athenian wrote of the war fought between Athens and Sparta, beginning the account at the very outbreak of the war, in the belief that it was going to be a great war and more worth writing about than any of those which had taken place in the past. (1.1.1)

When Thucydides eventually comes to describe the outbreak of the Atheno-Peloponnesian war in book 2, he describes the unsuccessful mission of the Spartan herald Melesippus who conveys a last minute offer of negotiation to the Athenians, but they refuse to give him a hearing and escort him back to the frontier of Attica. In Thucydides' account, when he reaches the frontier, Melesippus turns and proclaims: 'This day will be the beginning of great misfortune to Hellas' (2.12). Thucydides' narrative of the Atheno-Peloponnesian War is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Since Thucydides survived the war and witnessed its outcome, he was able to write prophetically about a contemporary war which, he claims from the outset, will be the most momentous war that the world has ever seen.

While we can cross-examine Thucydides' record of certain events or aspects of his analysis of the war, for the most part we

'remember' the Atheno-Peloponnesian war as Thucydides describes it. That we are still reading Thucydides' *History* is confirmation of his foresight in spotting the subject for a literary and historical masterpiece in the war in which he fought, through which he lived and which he wrote. Just as the lighthouse in Pharos allegedly bore the name of Sostratos, the Atheno-Peloponnesian war has Thucydides' name on it.

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